

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, MEDIA PRACTICES AND RADICAL DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Sarah Chiumbu

Résumé

Les mouvements sociaux en Afrique du Sud, comme ailleurs, combinent les méthodes de mobilisation traditionnelles avec l'utilisation des nouvelles technologies pour mobiliser et créer des réseaux pour la justice sociale. Peu de recherches ont été menées sur les luttes discursives qui se posent à ces mouvements dans leurs stratégies de mobilisation. Cet article examine les pratiques discursives d'un tel mouvement - la campagne Western Cape Anti-Expulsion, un mouvement social axé sur la collectivité formé en 2000 pour répondre à la crise du logement dans les zones urbaines du Cap occidental et le manque de prestation de services dans les domaines de l'eau et de l'électricité. À travers la lentille de la démocratie radicale et des théories de participation critiques, cet article fait valoir que les sites web, les plates-formes de médias sociaux et les projets de la presse écrite ne manifestent pas des principes démocratiques radicaux ni une véritable participation. Ces luttes et tensions discursives mettent en évidence l'importance de reconnaître la dynamique du pouvoir dans les pratiques médiatiques des mouvements sociaux dans le pays.

Mots-clés

Mouvement social, Western Cape campagne anti-expulsion, démocratie radicale, participation, Afrique du Sud

Abstract

Social movements in South Africa, as elsewhere, are combining traditional mobilisation methods with use of new media technologies to mobilize, create networks and lobby for social justice. While there exists some research that analyses how these social movements are using new media technologies, less sustained analysis has been made of the discursive struggles that confront these movements in their mobilisation strategies. This paper examines discursive practices of one such movement – the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, a community-driven social movement formed in 2000 to respond to housing crisis in urban Western Cape and lack of service delivery in the areas of water and electricity. Through the lens of radical democracy and critical participation theories, the paper argues that while the material on the websites, social media platforms and print media project counter-hegemonic ideologies, the discursive and institutional practices of the social movements do not manifest radical democratic principles and genuine participation. These discursive struggles and tensions highlight the importance of recognising power dynamics within media practices of social movements in the country. The paper ends by outlining for discursive opportunities and possibilities of subversion by social movements in South Africa.

Keywords

Social Movement, Western Cape Anti-eviction campaign, radical democracy, participation, South Africa

Introduction

One key development in post-apartheid South Africa has been the emergence of “new” social movements which exist to express the struggles of the poor with respect to basic needs such as water, housing, health and other social services. These ‘new’ social movements are part of what Bayat (2000:533) calls the ‘marginalised and deinstitutionalised subaltern’ urban underclass in the developing world that emerged as a result of the rapid global economic restructuring of the 1990s. Although the phenomenon of the urban poor is not new, the adoption of neoliberalism has intensified this phenomenon. A hegemonic, global economic arrangement has spawned astounding disparities in wealth. In South Africa, while poverty has been reduced since 1995, inequality has increased (Dugard and Bohler-Muller 2014). The 2015 Oxfam global inequality reports states that in South Africa, inequality is greater today than it was in 1994. Although there are plenty of explanations for South Africa’s persisting levels of socioeconomic inequalities, and to some extent poverty, there is some consensus that the government’s adoption of neoliberal macro-economic policies are in part to blame. Policies of cost recovery and privatization of public goods have had a negative impact on poor and marginalized people. As a reaction to these market-focused macro-economic policies, a number of urban social movements emerged in the late 1990s to mobilise for social and economic justice (Mirabftab & Wills 2005; Oldfield and Stokke 2006). The term ‘social movement’ is contested. Theorists converge on a definition that view social movements as actors coming together to foster some form of social change. Della Porta and Diani (1999) define social movements as interactive networks of people who have shared beliefs and sense of solidarity and who come together to take part in collective action to challenge the status quo. I am using the term to refer to urban community-based grassroots organizations that demand access to basic necessities, such as land, housing, water and electricity.

There is a vast body of research on social movements in South Africa (e.g. Ballard et al 2006, Dawson & Sinwell, 2012, Dawson & Setshedi 2014), but much of this work has been preoccupied with issues of causes and consequences of service delivery protest politics – particularly pertaining to housing and sanitation. Very few of these works have addressed the central question of the media and its role in social movement mobilization and how the mainstream media in South Africa represent and construct movements of the poor. There is however emerging empirical research on South African social movements and their use of media for mobilization which suggests that many movement groups are opting to use new media and alternative forms of media as they feel marginalized by the mainstream media (Chiumbu 2012, Dawson 2012, Willems 2010).

This paper examines discursive practices of social movements in South Africa in relation to how they use alternative forms of media to create counter-hegemonic discourses and the participatory processes involved in the production of alternative media texts through the lens of radical democracy and critical participatory theories. In a nutshell, the paper explores the extent to which principles and practices of radical democracy guide the work of these movements.

Insights of this paper derive from a field study carried out in 2010 on the use by the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign of new media technologies for mobilisation. The Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign (henceforth to be called the AEC) was formed in 2000 and then drew its membership from 15 community affiliates. It was established especially to respond to the housing crisis in urban Western Cape, which stems from the adoption of market principles by the state in the provision of housing and public services (see Oldfield & Stokke, 2006).

Although the AEC forms the main focus of the paper, I will also take a side glance at other social movements such as the Abahlali base Mjondolo (isiZulu for Shack Dwellers Association) and the now defunct Anti-Privatisation Forum. The mainstream media in South Africa, dominated by four print media oligopolies, one dominant public broadcaster, one commercial free-to-air television and two satellite television firms,¹ provide very little space for marginalised groups to express their concerns. The economic incentives of these media companies compromise their ability to support and participate in democratic communication. Hackett and Carroll point to a number of issues that are responsible for what they call ‘media’s democratic deficit’, including inequality, centralisation of power, homogenisation, corporate enclosure of knowledge and elitist process of communication policy making (Hackett and Carroll 2006, cited in Saeed 2009:469). In such restricted media space, subordinated groups turn to smaller and more grassroots media, labelled as “alternative” or “community” or “radical” to articulate their viewpoints. MirafTAB argues that many social movements in South Africa do not feel accommodated in what she calls ‘invited spaces’ of citizenship created for example through local government structures (MirafTAB 2005) and mainstream media. For instance, regarding the latter, community activists interviewed for this research pointed to excessive negative reporting and framing of their issues. As a result of negative reporting in mainstream media and marginalisation in ‘invited’ spaces of citizenship, social movements in South Africa have created ‘invented spaces’ (Cornwall 2002) that directly confront the authorities and challenge the status quo. Resistance strategies, such as protests, mass mobilisation, *toyi-toying* (a militant form of dance and protest that was popular during the Apartheid struggle), stayaways, blockading of roads and sit-ins usually take place in these invented spaces (see Willems 2010, Alexander 2010). Social movements in South Africa also rely on different forms of media such as press statements, pamphlets, posters, videos and of late new media technologies to share information and articulate their issues. Much of the literature on social movements, media and mobilisation is confined to Western scholarship and very little academic analysis has been conducted in relation to Sub-Saharan Africa, despite growing evidence that social movements on the continent are appropriating different forms of media, both old and new, in increasing numbers. In South Africa, previous research has investigated the use of new media technologies by social movements in South Africa (e.g. Wasserman 2007, Loudon 2010, Willems, 2010, Chiumbu 2012). Findings in these studies all show that new media technologies are indeed incorporated in the movements’ communication repertoire, but mainly for administrative and networking purposes and not necessarily for mass mobilisation purposes.

This present study expands the focus of this previous research by examining the institutional and discursive practices of the AEC in terms of both old and new media. The focus is not only on how the media produced by the social movement contest dominant meanings and create new social and political meanings, but the extent to which ordinary members of the movement are involved in producing their own media. This paper seeks to demonstrate the tensions, contradictions and dynamics inherent in media production at community level. The arguments raised in this paper regarding participation are framed within critical literature on community and participation which posits that communities are not “homogenous, static and harmonious

¹ The print media in the country is controlled by four major conglomerates – Avusa, Media24, Independent Newspapers and Caxton CTP. South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), the public service broadcaster in South Africa has 3 television stations and 18 radio stations. eTV is the only commercial free-to-air television station in South Africa. In addition, the country has 2 satellite TV companies – MultiChoice and TopTv. The latter was launched in 2010. A new media company, TNA, has entered the market and owns a newspaper, The New Age and a 24 hour news channel, ANN7.

units within which people share common interests and needs”, but that they conceal “power relations within ‘communities’ and further masks biases in interests and needs based on age, class, caste, ethnicity, religion and gender” (Gujit and Shah 1998, cited in Cooke and Kothari 2001: 6). The paper also uses insights from radical democracy to problematize ways in which community members belonging to these social movements engage in media practice as a tool of empowerment and expression of social and cultural identities. The ability of citizens to participate in local struggles and issues increases their potential to actively create progressive social change. The paper asks two research questions: To what extent are discursive practices in social movements participatory? To what extent are principles and practices of radical democracy elaborated and implemented within the movements? Through the use of media, have social movements created a “public space of representation”? (Melucci 1996: 221).

The paper is structured as follows: First I give a brief overview of new social movements in South Africa. This is followed by a review of key debates in media and social movements literature. The third section discusses the theoretical framework undergirding this paper. I then discuss the AEC’s discursive and mediated strategies. This is followed by a critique of the discursive practices of the AEC and other social movements through an examination of participatory practices, use of language and structural issues. I conclude by outlining discursive opportunities and possibilities of subversion by social movements in South Africa.

Contextualising Social Movements in South Africa

South Africa has a long history of social movements and protest actions. During the liberation struggle, the country witnessed militant and powerful community based movements, which used a wide range of tactics to delegitimize the prevailing government (Sinwell, 2011). However, when apartheid ended in 1994, the country saw the emergence of “new” social movements. Although South Africa’s 1996 Constitution promised civil, economic and social rights to everyone, the adoption in the same year of a market-driven economic policy known as the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) by the new government, led by the African National Congress Party (ANC) undercut these rights and further widened social and economic inequalities between the rich and poor. The neo-liberal policy environment favoured privatisation of services, thus making basic services unaffordable to a majority of people in the country. Hence water and electricity cut-offs and evictions and forced removals from homes became common (Ballard et al, 2006). The emergence of these ‘new’ social movements such as the Landless People’s Movement, Treatment Action Campaign, Abahlali BaseMjondolo, Concerned Citizens Forum, the Anti-Privatization Forum and the AEC, also coincided with the resurgence of global social justice movements that were then protesting increasing neo-liberalism at the global level. These so-called “new social movements,” have declined over the years and are being replaced by loosely structured and uncoordinated community protests organised around “service delivery”. These protests are termed ‘popcorn protest’ for their tendency “to flare up and settle down immediately” (Bond & Mottiar 2013). A good example is what has come to be known as the ‘poo protests’ in Cape Town. A group of community activists from the informal settlements of Khayelitsha began hurling faeces onto Cape Town’s N2 highway, in the departures section of the Cape and on the steps of provincial legislator offices (see Robins 2014).

Media and social movements: a review of literature

The literature on media and social movements can be divided into two fields of research. The first and most dominant thread of literature concerns how the media represent social movements. In the second approach, scholars concentrate on how social movement use the media for mobilisation purposes. Literature on media representation of social movements has roots in studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s on media and protest actions (e.g. Halloran et al 1970; Gitlin 1980). For instance, the study by Gitlin, dealing with the character of media coverage of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and anti-war activity in 1965, found that news frames trivialised, marginalised and disparaged protestors. Similar work conducted in subsequent years have shown that most media coverage of protest and social movements are framed within ‘the protest paradigm’ that emphasizes violence and chaos caused by protestors (e.g. Chan & Lee 1984, Hertog & McLeod 1994, , Kumar 2007, Boykoff, 2006). While research that shows that the media frame social movements largely in a negative manner has remained dominant across the decades, there also exists other research that seeks to disrupt the ‘protest paradigm’ by arguing that this paradigm only appears in certain cases, for instance if the protest involved radical tactics, in politically conservative newspapers or when the protest addressed political topics (Harlow & Johnson 2011, Boyle, McLeod, & Armstrong, 2012; Weaver & Scacco, 2013).

The second line of research in the relationship between social movements and media is the focus on the discursive and technological environment within which social movements articulate their concerns. Throughout the 20th century, social movements have produced their own media to further their causes, such as leaflets, newsletters, murals, community media and street videos. However, the widespread use of the Internet in the early 1990s opened new avenues and spaces for social movements to coordinate actions, build networks and practice media activism. Activists have made particularly effective use of new media technologies (ICTs) which facilitate open participation and horizontal communication and create bottom-up participative interactive spaces (Juris, 2005, McCaughey and Ayers 2003.). New media have made profound changes in alternative movement media activism, facilitating “real-time” communication, exchange of information and coordination of action at distance. The rich and diverse literature on social movements and ICTs points to how new media technologies have transformed mobilisation strategies, enhanced participation and strengthened collective identities within social movements (e.g. Van Donk et al, 2004). ICTs are introducing new protest repertoires – ranging from email lists, hacktivism to virtual sit-ins. While traditional social movements theories, most prominently the resource mobilisation approach, perceive media simply as tools to mobilise resources, new social movement (NSM) theories analyses the role of the media, both old and new, in identity formation, ideology and framing processes (see Langman 2005). Collective identity is important to understand today’s social movements. Melucci (1989:34) defines collective identity as a “shared definition produced by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientations of their actions as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their actions take place”. Collective identity mainly operates through language and symbols and result communication resources are necessary for any identity formation (Melucci, 1989).

Within this corpus of research, there is thin literature on social movements and media in Africa, specifically more so in the South African context.

Theoretical Interventions

Radical Democracy & Participation

Radical democracy as an ideology was articulated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985). They argue that social movements which attempt to create social and political change need a strategy which challenges neoliberal and neoconservative concepts of democracy. Thus, theories of radical democracy engage with the crisis of democracy, more specifically its neo-liberal variant. Although there are different approaches to theorising radical democracy, Lloyd and Little (2009) offer a useful typology. They identify two approaches to studies on radical democracy. The first one involves critical theorists who draw their inspiration from the Frankfurt School and advocate for deliberative democracy that emphasises rational discourse and consensus in the Habermasian ‘public sphere’ sense. The second one draws insights from French post-structuralism (Lloyd and Little 2009:2). The latter approach is better exemplified by the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe 1985) who view democracy as a site of antagonism, difference and dissent. They argue that dominant forms of democracy in their attempts to build consensus, oppress differing opinions, races, classes and gender (Mouffe 2000). Mouffe calls for a model of democracy based on agonistic pluralism, which provide arenas where citizens can express their disagreements and where difference can be confronted. This model is designed to optimize the prospects for citizens to confront their clashing views (Mouffe 2000). Mouffe goes to state that “the task for democratic theorists and politicians should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant “agonistic” public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted’ (2005: 3).

This paper is not concerned with these different schools of thought, but is more interested in the central tenets of radical democracy, of which three are emphasised here. First, radical democracy is sceptical about the capacity of conventional democracies to engage the energies of ordinary citizens. Second, radical democracy fosters continual proliferation of new voices, new communities, and new identities as part of an on-going process of democratisation and third, participation is central to active citizenship (Lummis 1996, Lloyd and Little 2009).

In terms of the central issues discussed in this paper, theories of radical democracy become important in theorising the roles of alternative media in empowering local communities. Radical democracy can only be brought about through the pluralism created by an alternative environment, which can become the channel of the excluded identities and anti-hegemonic views. The production of alternative and participatory forms of media can be seen as an example of active citizenship, which is central to creating a more radical and inclusive form of democracy (Mouffe 1992). Clemencia Rodriguez captures this very well:

As defined by the theory of radical democracy, the concept of citizenship implies that social subjects claim a space for their public voices, that these social subjects tenaciously intervene and shape their identities, altering circulating social discourses and cultural codes, and that, as a result of the above, these negotiations and renegotiations empower the communities involved (Rodriguez, 2001: 158)

Ideally, alternative media platforms can act as channels of a radical democratic project by allowing community members from divergent social groups to define and constitute themselves, facilitate debate and transmit their viewpoints to a wider public. Social movements should ideally perform the task of expressing antagonistic positions via their specific radical discursive practices. In addition, they should articulate emancipatory alternatives and develop counter-hegemonic cultural and economic practices. In the context of this paper, I use radical democracy to determine the extent to which discursive practices within the AEC embody radical democratic principles. I thus combine the notion of radical democracy with the empirical exploration of social movement's concrete discursive and social practices.

Participation and Empowerment

The concept of participation is derived from the needs-based development models in the 1970s and 1980s which attempted to debunk the development approaches embedded in the modernisation paradigm which was considered to be top-down and technicist. The concept has been adopted by international donor organisations and policy-makers alike. Participation is meant to empower individuals and groups to own their projects (Chambers 1997). Therefore participatory practice within grassroots movements has often been seen as empowering, democratic, just and effective. In this article, I draw on recent literature that challenges the pervasive belief that participation is unequivocally good and void of unequal power relations (e.g. Cooke & Kothari 2001). Critical participatory theorists are critical of the top-down goal-oriented participation models stating that it imposes institutional barriers over communities and thereby inhibits other processes that promote empowerment and freedom. The contributions in the book by Cooke and Kothari *Participation: The New Tyranny* (2001) assert that participation in practice is not often participatory, bottom-up and open. Instead, it maintains existing power relationships, though masking this power behind the rhetoric and techniques of participation (Christens & Speer 2006). Cornwall aptly captures this situation when she states:

claims to "full participation" and "the participation of all stakeholders"--familiar from innumerable project documents and descriptions of participatory processes--all too often boil down to situations in which only the voices and versions of the vocal few are raised and heard (Cornwall 2003:1325)

Although the critique of mainstream participation theories is drawn from development studies, I use it to critique participation practices within social movements in South Africa. Most importantly, I am interested in who is allowed to speak and who is not; who participates in media production and who does not; the tyranny that may exist within these supposedly 'structureless' organisations and elite interests that may manifest behind the rhetoric of participation.

Social Movements and media in South Africa

Social movements exist to mobilise action in response to specific issues and events. They do these using different protest repertoires. Since they challenge societies at the symbolic level, media become important spaces for projecting to the world contentious issues the movements care about. Through mainstream media, social movements are able to gain visibility and reach a wider public. At the same time, movements also use alternative media platforms to develop and share critical discourses on contentious issues. These platforms become, therefore, important counter-public spheres (Mattoni et al 2010: 2).

In discussing the AEC's use and creation of media, I use Cammaerts' 'mediation opportunity structure' concept which theorises how activists are both enabled and constrained by the media environment. In this context, mediation is used to:

capture diverging articulations between media, communication, protest and activist and... enables us to link up various ways in which media and communication are relevant to protest and activism: the framing processes in mainstream media and by political elites, the self-representations by activists, the use, appropriation and adaptation of ICTs by activists and citizens to mobilize for and organize direct actions, as well as media and communication practices that constitute mediated resistance in its own right (Cammaerts 2012:118).

The concept of mediation opportunity structure derives from the literature of the theory of 'political opportunity structure' used by social movement theorists to refer to how political and social structures at any moment in time affect social movements (Garret 2006)..

The concept of 'mediation opportunity structure' is used at three analytical levels. The first is the media opportunity structure which defines the extent to which media are able to access and get their messages across in the mainstream media. The second level is that of discursive opportunity structure and this involves self-mediation strategies used by social movements to produce counter-narratives outside the mainstream media. The third level is that of the networked opportunity structure referring to resistance practices by social movements that are mediated through new media technologies (Cammaerts 2012: 122-128). These three levels are interrelated and they impact on each other in various ways.

Mediation opportunity structure and social movements in South Africa

Media opportunity structure

Social movements depend on the media for several reasons, among them "to mobilize political support, to increase the legitimation and validation of their demands and to enable them to widen the scope of conflict beyond the likeminded" (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, cited in Cammaerts 2012:119). In South Africa, the relationship between social movements and the mainstream media has been fraught with tensions and ambivalence. Although research on this relationship is scarce, observations by Duncan (2010) seem to validate some concerns raised by activists during my field work. She states that coverage of protest actions in South Africa "tends to be episodic, focusing on the moment of protest, which does not explain why a community got to the point where they felt that the only way of communicating their message was to barricade roads, stone the mayor's house or torch a library". Willems argues

that '[m]ainstream broadcasting and print media often delegitimized the new social movements and framed their actions in terms of "conflict", "troublemakers", or the "ultra-left"' (2010, 492). In focus group discussions (FGD), one member summed up these sentiments thus:

The media do not tell our side of our story, they focus on trying to make the municipality of the City of Cape Town seem as though it's providing good services. The media take videos of our Councillors and politicians pretending to speak on our behalf...these politicians make use of the media to silence us...(FGD with members of AEC Gugulethu, Cape Town, 2 October 2010).

Similarly, the Secretary of the AEC stated that although the movement engages the media and invite them to their events, they often do not come and if they do, they cover their issues in a distorted manner and strip them of their ideological significance. The coordinator for the Delft Symphony TRA anti-eviction campaign in Cape Town stated "the mainstream media like the Cape Argus, SABC [South African Broadcasting Corporation] and ETV don't really cover us - although they sometime come to cover us when there is a really big issue, but they rarely report our daily struggles" (Interview, 16 April 2010). This view by social movements on skewed media coverage of their causes is corroborated in recent research that show that the media delimitises protest and often use the 'protest paradigm' to frame their stories (Duncan 2014, Pointer 2015).

Discursive opportunity structure

As a result of negative reporting in mainstream media and marginalisation in 'invited' spaces of citizenship, social as stated earlier, movements in South Africa have created 'invented spaces' 'that directly confront the authorities and challenge the status quo' (Miraftab 2006: 195). The mediated 'invented spaces' used by the AEC have been used, pamphlets, posters and videos and ICTs to communicate, protest and mobilise. At the time of the research in 2010, the movements had a dedicated team who coordinated media actions. Media work in the AEC was conducted by the Secretary and Chairperson of the movement, with the assistance of outside volunteers, who share the values and ideologies of the movement.

Social movements in South Africa have increasingly turned to alternative forms of media to communicate and publicise their struggles. The term alternative media has no fixed meaning, but broadly refers to non-mainstream media messages, outlets and channels which are created and diffused outside mainstream informational circuits (Atton 2007). In a study of social movements in South Africa and their appropriation of small-scale independent media platforms, Dawson (2012) critically examines the use of "dress, slogans, murals, songs, radio, dance, poetry and political theatre as forms of nano-media used by community-based movements in the process of mobilisation and claim-making" (p.321). In an effort to produce counter-narratives and disseminate them independently from the mainstream media organizations, social movements in South Africa have made use of films (documentaries), books, leaflets and pamphlets, as discursive tools to amplify their struggles. For instance the AEC embarked on a unique project when they self-produced a book titled "*No Land! No House! No Vote: Voices from the Symphony Way Pavement Dwellers*". The book was produced by one of the AEC's affiliates, the Symphony Way Pavement Dwellers, a group of residents who were forcibly removed from a township in Delft in 2008 and relocated to

Blikkiesdorp, (Afrikaans for Tin Town), a government built shantytown.² The book, written by the residents themselves in the form of short narratives, poems and testimonies, would fit what is referred to as *testimonio*, “drawing upon and (re)telling one’s lived experience to expose oppression and systemic violence” (Espino et al 2012: 444). A counter-part social movement, the now defunct Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) produced a newsletter *Struggle Continues* and music CDs that they distributed for free. The documentary *Dear Mandela* produced by New-York based South African, Dara Kell, chronicles the struggle for housing of the Abahlali BaseMjondolo. This documentary, and others on housing struggles in Cape Town as *Sounds of Blikkiesdorp* and *Tin Town*, produced by filmmakers from the North, while giving voice to the narratives that are often shunned by the mainstream media in the country, at the same time remove agency from the same people the films are trying to empower. This practice of activists from the North speaking on behalf of and taking causes of the poor in South Africa, highlights the ambiguities of participation, which on the one hand highlights power to radically transform political relations, yet on the other, its potential for exploitation, marginalization and social control (Gaynor 2013:2). Although the documentaries solicited the participation of members of the social movements, it is prudent to ask a question by Cohen and Uphoff (1980, cited in Sinwell 2005): “does the initiative come from the grass roots or from the national centre”? This question relates to the degree to which beneficiaries have power to make decisions on initiatives. Linda Alcoff reminds us of the danger of speaking for others as this is,

borne of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another’s situation or as one who can champion a just cause... and the effect of the practice of speaking for others is often [...] erasure and reinscription of sexual, national and other kinds of hierarchies (Alcoff 1991: 29)

Couldry argues that denial of voice can be another form of oppression and speaking for others ultimately disauthorises those spoken for (Couldry 2010).

Networked Opportunity Structure

Networked or online activism also forms part of social movements’ repertoires of collective action (see Melucci 1996, Juris 2005, Loudon 2010). Even though the majority of social movements in South Africa are located in poor communities, ICTs - internet and mobile phones - have occupied a central role and offers these movements extensive mediation opportunities. The AEC ran a website which collated press statements, articles written about the movements’ activities and statements of solidarity from global social movements and individuals. The AEC website was relatively interactive and allowed for comments and feedback. Even though its website was closed in May 2014³, the AEC continues with social media presence in the form of Facebook and Twitter. Abahlali baseMjondolo, runs a dynamic website that includes press statements, solidarity messages, videos and political writings from the movement and its allies.

² The Delft-Symphony ‘Temporary Relocation Area’ (TRA) has an estimated 1600 one-room units made from shiny corrugated iron structures and has been nicknamed ‘Blikkiesdorp’ (Afrikaans for Tin Town) by residents. The residents of this temporary area were moved from the Joe Slovo informal settlement in 2007 to make way for the N2 Gateway Housing project.

³³ The reasons of the website closure are not known to the author, but could be due to the disintegration of the AEC over the years.

The internet and social media platforms, have provided grassroots movements spaces to develop counter-discourses that challenge and resist dominant ideologies. For instance, media, state and market narratives on the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup held in South Africa were roundly celebratory with a focus on economic benefits, impact and nation-building. The AEC produced counter-narratives via their website and social media platforms about forced relocations of poor Capetonians who had lost their homes or trading spaces due to World Cup related regeneration projects. The AEC together with other urban social movements, labour formations pointed out the massive gentrification linked to World Cup accommodation projects and how this affected thousands of residents (see de Bruijn 2010, Ngonyama 2010). International media, such as the UK *Guardian* and *Independent*, picked up the social movements narratives and produced hard-hitting news articles.

Unlike other social movements globally, the Internet in the AEC cannot be seen as a platform for civil disobedience. Digitally-based acts of civil disobedience include tactics aim to upset the status quo by disrupting the normal flow of information, thereby attracting attention to their cause and message, such as distributed denial of service (DDOS) actions and website defacements. Others include hacktivism, virtual sit-ins in which government and corporate web sites are blocked, preventing legitimate usage (Garret 2006). Disobedience by a social movement in South Africa nearer to online civil disobedience tactics outlined above is recorded by Willems (2010) who shows how the mobile phone was in one incident used as a tool of protest in its own right. The members of Abahlali BaseNjondolo used mobile phones to send grievances to the government and in the process deliberately blocked the landline phone connections at the government offices. Willems quotes one movement representative:

All comrades were phoning, phoning, phoning, comrade after comrade. When they picked up the phone, they hear its AbM. Everything was blocked in the government offices because of AbM. This was another toying-toying, we were protesting using cellphones (cited in Willems, 2010, p. 494).

Online civil disobedience tactics mentioned above are not part of mobilisation strategies used by urban social movements in South Africa. Rather, the Internet is used mainly networking purposes (see Loudon, 2010; Wasserman, 2007, 2005; Lewis, 2005). The AEC, for example, views the Internet mainly as an alternative space to profile and explain issues to mainly left-leaning South Africans, academics, journalists and the international community. For instance, Facebook ‘friends’ of the AEC are largely activists from outside the movement who mainly post messages of solidarity. The volunteer who managed and updated the AEC website when it existed; an outsider to the movement, had this to say:

Most of our members cannot access the Internet... the website seeks to be the ‘technological voice’ of our members and their concerns. Our main aim is to enlighten civil society organisations, government, academics and other relevant institutions on issues faced by our communities (Personal Interview, 1 October 2010).

In a study on how the Cape Town based Treatment Action Campaign uses the internet, Wasserman (2005) establishes that although the Internet reaches a small elite group, the Treatment Action Campaign views it as important for “audience-building” as its messages reach beyond activist circles and thus the Internet helps in the creation of local, continental and global networks and links.

The website is also used to mobilise financial resources and develop a network of elite support. Bank details are placed on the website and users are able to donate money to the movements.

Certainly the websites and social media platforms of the AEC cannot be seen as sites for counter-hegemonic and contentious activism. What exists in South Africa is an outward form of mobilisation which deliberately targets these middle class activists. The Internet in this case is employed for what Sandor Vegh (2003) calls Internet-enhanced activism where it is used to “enhance the traditional advocacy techniques, as an additional communication channel, by raising awareness beyond the scope possible before the Internet” (Vegh, 2003:72). Thus the Internet becomes an additional tool to other forms of mobilisation such as direct action, mass mobilisation and popular education and legal challenges. Similarly, Fenton notes that

virtual computer-mediated ties will not replace traditional forms of protest, such as rallies and demonstrations but may complement them in terms of building collective identity and reinforcing solidarity. The social movements must find the balance between the virtual connection and exchange and the actualization or the enacting of that politics (Fenton, 2006: 233).

Mobile phones have also provided the AEC and other movements with new ways of mobilising. Despite the hindrances of costs and access, the ubiquity of mobile phones provide social movements in South Africa new channels to better coordinate their activities and send information to members in a timely fashion, through for example the use of SMS bulk software (Chiumbu 2012). For example, one AEC member in leadership position had this to say:

The AEC holds public meetings every second Sunday. The co-ordinators of each community anti-eviction campaign inform each other of the public meeting via mobile text messages, then each co-ordinator informs their community through word of mouth, mainly through door-to-door (Personal interview, 16 April 2010).

Although statistics show that mobile phone penetration has surpassed the 100% mark in South Africa, there is still divide between those with access to smartphones and those without. The divide between those with access to Internet access is also wide. Statistics for 2013 show that 40% of South African households have at least one member who either used the Internet at home or had access to it elsewhere, with only 10% of households having Internet access at home (SA Statistics 2014). As more affluent people get access to broadband, enabling them to creatively use the Internet and access different social media platforms, many in underdeveloped urban areas have no means to afford faster internet. They therefore become ever more distanced from political participation and deliberation that new media technologies allow. Well- resourced social movements such as the Treatment Action Campaign⁴ and Sikhula Sonke⁵ who have digital capital participate more meaningfully in digitally mediated spaces and enjoy many advantages over their digitally disadvantaged counterparts, such as the AEC and Abahlali baseMjondolo.

⁴ The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) was founded in December 1998 to campaign for access to AIDS treatment and critical issues related to the quality of and access to healthcare (<http://www.tac.org.za>)

⁵ Sikhula Sonke, meaning we grow together in IsiXhosa works with farm dwellers, mainly in the Western Cape Province. Sikhula Sonke operates as a social movement dealing with all livelihood challenges of farmwomen (domestic violence, food insecurity alcoholism (<http://www.ssonke.org.za>))

Critique of discursive practices: participation, language and structure

The myth of participation

Participatory language has often been used to celebrate social movements engagement in online mediated spaces. In most research on ICTs and social movements, the Internet, including social media, are seen to facilitate more non-hierarchical and collaborative communication structures (e.g. Juris, 2005; della Porta and Mosca, 2005; van de Donk et al, 2004). In reality, however, different forms of exclusion, silencing or masking of dissent views exist. In the case of the AEC, exclusion in mediated spaces takes place on many levels. The first one has to do with access to digital technologies. The Internet does not connect movement members in non-hierarchical relationships, as most members do not have access as shown in the following statement:

I visit the website once or maybe twice a month because of unavailability of office space and access to the Internet...I normally let the AEC IT volunteer handle all stuff that require sending emails and so on. Our main problem is that the majority of our members lack computer skills. Affordability is another problem. At the moment, I do have a laptop that I was given as a gift after completing my computer literacy certificate, but it is not connected to the Internet as yet...(Coordinator for the Gugulethu Backyard Association, Personal Interview, September 2010).

There is thus a certain exclusion that is created as only a few members, most notably in leadership positions, enjoy the benefits of the Internet. This means that ordinary community members without access to the Internet are not part of content creation and the Internet is not an alternative space for them to contest dominant representations of themselves and produce non-conformist and counter-hegemonic representations of their views. The voices of the more marginal are barely raised, let alone heard, in these digital spaces. The second form of exclusion takes place through technical capability. The AEC website was managed and updated by outside people not affected by the struggles. These people were often white and middle-class. This use of sympathetic, middle-class and often white male volunteers in social movements in South Africa has been a topic of contested debates among social movement theorists in South Africa (see Walsh, 2008; Sinwell, 2010; Bohmke, 2010). As Fenton points out, “the use of the Internet by new social movements may be, and is frequently problematic at the democratic level. Many sites are generated and maintained by individuals or small groups with little or no accountability or representativeness” (Fenton, 2006: 227). The AEC and online discursive and institutional practices do not manifest radical democratic principles.

The question of language

Language also acts as a barrier to effective participation in both online and offline deliberations. The AEC websites, social media platforms and print material are all in English. Most community members generally speak Xhosa and Afrikaans. Luke Sinwell (2010)

criticises the use of websites run by social movements in South Africa. He notes that they do not assist the cause of the poor and do little to build movements on the ground:

I have learnt that while websites do much to publicise movements to a group of left-leaning South African and international activists and scholars, they do little to actually mobilise and strengthen movements. Merely amplifying the voices of the poor and assuming that those participating from below will embody the truth does not enable us to understand the potential and limitations of movements to challenge neo-liberalism (Sinwell, 2010: 39).

In relation to the APF, Buhlungu aptly observes:

If the political activists in the APF are the main point of international contact for the organisation, then electronic communications are the main vehicle for such links. In this regard, the vast majority of APF members are disadvantaged and therefore remain dependent on those with resources and who speak English, the language through which these interactions are conducted (Buhlungu, 2006: 84)

Rodríguez (2001) draws on Chantal Mouffe's (1992) notions of radical democracy to argue that the strength of any form of alternative media lies not only in their ability to produce counter-hegemonic discourses, but also in allowing opportunities for ordinary people to tell their own stories in their own language. Thus the Internet remains an elite form of communication in the South African social movement context and as such has limitations in providing an alternative space for counter-hegemonic activism. Genuine cyber-activism is based on real participation and online deliberations by ordinary people. The decentred and non-hierarchical nature of the Internet allows for effective generation and distribution of information and response and feedback (Salter, 2006). However, the elite nature of the Internet and the use of English enables the movements to extend their audience and reach a larger group of potential sympathisers. Although as stated earlier, the nature of the social movements' websites has been criticised (see Sinwell, 2010; Bohmke, 2010), it can be argued that the middle class activists targeted by the websites have brought much to the movement in terms of discourse, links and some influence enabling them to advertise their cause to larger audiences as the following postings on the AEC website show

Post-Apartheid South Africa is a struggle between the 'poor and rich', 'exploited and exploiter', the 'moralist and the anti-moralist' and the 'powerless and the powerful'. The powerful has systematically excluded the poor from public spaces (homes, courts, jobs, etc) and organisations like AEC have been great in uniting the poor and marginalised. AEC must take its campaign to its logical conclusion; beyond social pressure to political power. (Gabriel Campher, USA, 5.01. 2010)

The internet is used by the AEC to network with social movements in other parts of the world. Langman (2005:60) argues that these networks enable the formation of "instant coalitions and immediate coordination with numerous other progressive groups and organizations to find great power in numbers". During interviews, the secretary of the AEC admitted that that the website was used mainly to target the international community and thus it had "exposed the AEC's activities tremendously whereby we've had some social movements and individual supporters from London, Germany, Paris and Italy and supporting our work" (Personal interview, 17 April 2010).

The tyranny of ‘structurelessness’ and prefigurative politics

A plethora of literature on social movements has tended to valorise the structure of these movements as non-hierarchical, smooth and flat. Yet power relations within social movements are an enormous source of dispute and argument in contemporary activism (see Yates 2015). As noted in previous sections, the day to day social and discursive practices of social movements marginalize and exclude others voices on grounds of lack of access to mediated communicative structures, digital inequality and language. The issue of exclusion points to the challenges of participation in community-based organisations that ascribe to principles of non-hierarchy and horizontal leadership. It was noted during the research that a few key activists rise up in an unofficial leadership position to steer mobilisation activities. This points to what Freeman (1972) calls the “tyranny of structurelessness” where “informal elites” arise within the affected communities and control the production of ideas (Pickard 2011:32). In this scenario, structurelessness masks power. These contradictions within social movements highlight the importance of recognising power dynamics and discursive struggles present and their influence in use of media and ICTs for mobilisation. As Pointer (2004: 273) notes in a study of the Mandela Park Backyarders, an affiliate of the AEC, again and again, within these social movements, “spaces are closed down, organization is centralized and hierarchy emerges in [these] new spaces”. The same dynamics of power are evident in the production of media in the AEC where the Secretary, Chairperson and a few activists control this activity. Therefore, information dissemination and retrieval become a privilege of a few community leaders and more visible activists are given a voice. In this sense, the AEC has not been a site of prefigurative politics defined as the idea that the organizational form that an activist group takes should prefigure the kind of society it wishes to create (Graeber 2013: 23). Prefiguration therefore anticipates or partially actualises goals sought by groups as articulated by Bastani below:

If a group is fighting to abolish some or all forms of hierarchy in society, prefigurative politics demands they individually and as a group adhere as closely to that goal as possible in their everyday political practice (Bastani 2011, n.p).

Certainly the discursive practices of the AEC and other social movements in South Africa do not always prefigure the society that the movements are trying to create.

Conclusion: Discursive opportunities and possibilities of subversion by social movements in South Africa

This article has focused on discursive practices of the AEC with a view to assess the extent to which these practices adhere to principles of radical democracy which emphasize deliberation, participation and the empowering of marginalised voices. The main argument made in the article is that while some of the material produced by AEC on website, social media and print media project counter-hegemonic ideologies, the discursive and institutional practices do not manifest radical democratic principles and genuine participation. Media production is not often democratic, communication not always non-hierarchical and power to facilitate coordinated and collective action not evenly redistributed. In conclusion, we can

cautiously conclude that discursive practices of the AEC and the few other social movements mentioned in this article have not supported agonistic engagement in any sustained way. As stated before, agonistic engagement spaces facilitate the voicing of diverse and contesting views. Dahlgren (2005) has noted that while social movement organisations externally seek to challenge dominant discourses rather than attain consensus, internally these organisations strive for some consensus that ends up silencing other minority voices within the groups.

Social movement activism is not all about mobilising against an unjust system, but it is about transforming structures that promote inequality and injustice. Khasnabish and Haiven (2014) argue that “social movements are both spaces to reimagine the world and vehicles to transform the imaginative landscape of society more broadly.” The issue of radical transformation aligns with the goals advanced by Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). Freire argues that a transformational approach to participation is “for people to shape and control their own histories and destinies, not within the world as it exists, but in order to transform that world” (Freire 1972, cited in Sinwell 2008:247).

It is also clear that confining discursive practices to one form of alternative media – ICTs – is myopic. Digital inequality is a constant factor among the urban poor in South Africa. It is thus important to disrupt the techno-centric approach to mobilisation and adopt a communicative ecology approach. This approach is invested in finding out which communicative and media spaces are available to communities in their geographical locales. Communicative ecologies theorists differentiate between distinct ‘layers’ in an ecology - discursive (themes or content of both mediated and unmediated communication), technological (ICTs, TV, radio) and social (community meetings, informal networks, institutions) and each layer provides an opportunity for empowerment (Foth & Hearn 2007). These layers should be seen as intricately entwined and mutually constitutive, rather than discrete. Not only should social movements just focus on ICTs, there is need to widen self-mediation practices by using other forms of alternative and subversive media such as conscious hip-hop, spoken poetry, protest theatre and culture jamming. Social movements in South Africa should begin to use these forms of media to subvert dominant social, economic and cultural codes in order to get their messages across to a broader spectrum of citizens.

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